

Poem for a Birthday by maplemood

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Birthday Fluff, F/M, Families of Choice, Fluff and Angst, Gen, POV Multiple, Past Relationship(s), Poetry, Post-Season/Series 02, Season/Series 02 Spoilers, Team as Family, Unconventional Families, Unrequited Love

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Holly Wheeler, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max Hargrove, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Nancy Wheeler & Dustin Henderson, Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson, Steve Harrington & Holly Wheeler, Steve Harrington & The Stranger Things Kids, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler (past), background Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-11-06

Updated: 2017-11-06

Packaged: 2022-04-02 14:40:55

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 5,197

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

He'd walk through an entire store full of nothing but bows, balloons, and all manner of pink sparkly shit if it meant making those kids happy.

(The summer after El closes the gate, Nancy and Steve help plan her first-ever birthday party and try not to let their own feelings for each other get in the way. They're only partially successful.)

Poem for a Birthday

Author's Note:

I honestly planned on this being a lot shorter than it actually is.

Love is the bone and sinew of my curse.

The vase, reconstructed, houses

The elusive rose.

--Sylvia Plath, "The Stones"

nancy

The call comes in June. In summer, like all good things; maybe it was something in the lab, or something still running in the water, but everything that's comfortable and dependable and normal has a habit of flying out of Hawkins once the new school year hits. Anything (*anyone*) can disappear in autumn, when monsters and portals pop up like pumpkins. Summer? Summer's slow and sweaty and easy—or as easy as anything feels these days. Summer is a time to relax.

Until you're roped into planning your brother's girlfriend's birthday party over walkie-talkie with the town police chief.

"So." Nancy taps her ballpoint against a fresh legal pad. "Colors. Have you picked out the colors yet?"

His huff explodes into static. "It's not a damn wedding."

"Hop. This is important." On the other side of her bed Mike rolls his eyes like she's lost her mind, but Nancy presses on. "You know Carol Perkins?"

"Heard the name."

He pulled Carol over not two weeks ago. "Well, I was at her ninth birthday, and Carol cried for three hours because her Mom bought

yellow balloons instead of pink.”

Silence. More static.

Nancy waits.

Mike twirls a finger at his temple.

Nancy flips him the finger.

Another huff. “Three hours, huh?”

“Yeah. She ended up dripping snot on her birthday cake.”

“Okay, pink,” he says. “And green—light green.”

“And you want those on the cake, too?”

“Jesus Christ—”

Shopping List, Nancy writes across the top of the pad. A line down,
Balloons—pink + green.

+

Mike’s counting out his spare change on her quilt. Last Nancy heard the boys were joining forces to buy El something “really cool” and “actually special” and “totally tubular”.

“Actually special” is scary enough. “Totally tubular” is terrifying.

“Three whole hours?” he asks.

Nancy folds the list in half. “I wasn’t lying. She did cry.”

steve

She drops it on him, clear out of the fucking blue, and, you know, what is he supposed to say? Huh?

When has he ever said *no* to Nancy Wheeler?

He tries, sure. He's not that pathetic. And—come on. He barely knows the kid. When he knows too many kids already; no need to add more.

“She's never had a real birthday party before.”

Like that'll win him over. Except, see, it kind of does—Steve knows nobody was sneaking birthday cakes into the Hawkins Lab (he's not that much of an idiot, either) but no candles, no songs, nothing... dickheads keeping her imprisoned there couldn't even spare a few words for a little girl on her birthday. He won't admit this (can't become a freak and a loser to the freaks and losers) but it almost makes Steve want to go after those bastards with a baseball bat.

Then again. They're a lot of bastards he's dying to go after with a baseball bat, especially these days.

Nancy's just not one of them.

And neither are the kids.

Steve Harrington would no more admit to this than he would to the second he just spent imagining beating the white coats bloody, but he'd walk through an entire store full of nothing but bows, balloons, and all manner of pink sparkly shit, if it meant making those kids happy.

He's gotten too used to it. Dustin calling him up all the goddamn time, chattering like Steve's got nothing better to talk about, no better place to be than “Come on man, this campaign's gonna be epic—yeah, it's in Mrs. Wheeler's basement. No. Steve. Steve! Man, she won't mind. I swear.”

Max's grins, Will's shy smiles. He *does* make them happy. God knows how. It's like a drug.

And so Steve sucks it up, and does exactly what Nancy tells him to.

+

Which turns out to be two things, mainly: grunt work and babysitting. Near as Steve can figure, Nancy's handling the logistics

of this mess, Mrs. Byers is doing the cleaning, and all Chief's doing is dishing out the money to make it happen.

Smart man.

"Yo, guys. Hey!"

Their heads all swirl his way like a bunch of owls. Steve digs his wallet out.

"What do you say I pay you each ten bucks and we're out of here in ten minutes?"

Five pairs of eyes narrow.

"Fifteen minutes. Huh?"

"You're such a douchebag," Wheeler Junior hisses.

"It's her first birthday present. Like, in ever!"

"These things take time, man!"

"U-huh." Would they move any faster if he started pulling his hair out by the roots? Probably not. Little shits. "No, that makes sense to me. What doesn't make sense is, it's been two hours already—"

"Steve?"

Max is trying for the baby-doll eyes again. Looks frickin' ridiculous.

"What?"

"Where's Holly?"

Steve's stomach drops.

"Shit!"

He does a quick headcount and nope, no pair of blond pigtailed bobbing around everyone else's knees. His stomach hits the floor.

"I told one of you dipshits to hold her hand!"

The kid's own brother shrugs like it's no big deal. "She's probably in the next aisle."

She isn't.

Great. Just great. One of the only things he can do for these rugrats, the *only* thing he can do for Nancy, and—Christ, baby Holly is probably getting creamed by a car as they speak. Steve smacks his hands together.

"Search party! Everyone spread out!"

Frickin' little morons looking at him like he's the idiot. "Now!" Steve barks, and the group splits, rolling their eyes and shuffling their feet.

He is, though, Steve thinks as he races out the door. He should have been holding her hand. Who cares what anyone else thinks; screw Tommy H. and Billy and all the rest of them, she's just a little kid, just a—

"Holly!"

He gets a couple stares, but no flash of blond, no cars screeching to a stop, no screaming or crying. Okay. This is fine. She's somewhere inside. Climbing the shelves for all he knows—

Steve finds her at the back of the department store, by the racks of gardening tools and outdoor toys. Holly's reaching up to grab at the rack of hula hoops.

"Oh, no way. Freeze!"

She does. He grabs her hand anyway, too hard. Holly's face crumples up like a soggy tissue. She begins to screech.

"Steve?"

"Fucking peachy," he mutters before slapping on his brightest King of Hawkins High grin (*don't sweat, man, you still got this*). Then he turns, careful not to yank Holly's arm any more than he already has.

"Oh, hey, Mrs. Holland."

Steve's about to drop some lame-ass bit like *What a surprise to see you here!* (In a store. Shopping.) when Barb's mom—that's who she is to him now, always—frowns. Sad expression on an already sad face.

"What are you doing with Holly Wheeler?"

Steve *feels* the sign blink on in his head, flashing letters like an arcade game. *Abort mission. Abort.* He casts a desperate glance over the surrounding aisles and bawls, "*Wheeler!*"

Dustin comes running to the rescue instead. Almost slams into Mrs. Holland's cart while he's at it; Steve has to let go of Holly and practically catch him in a football tackle.

"We're indoors, man! Jesus!"

"Oh, good. You found her," Dustin flashes his pearly whites at Mrs. Holland. "Steve's looking out for us today," he says, knowing what he needs to say without asking. "Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler went to Indianapolis for their anniversary, and Nancy was losing her mind, so..."

"Oh, I see. They can be a handful at that age." Mrs. Holland smiles down at Holly in a way that makes Steve's gut twist. Worse, she raises her eyes to smile at him. "Keep your chin up."

Steve takes Holly's hand again. "Will do, ma'am."

Once she's gone Dustin takes off his cap in order to fan his face. "Whew! Okay, we're done here."

"Did you pick something out?" Holly's tugging at him, whining to get back to the hula hoops.

"No. We were thinking we'd hit the pet store next."

Bashing his head in with his own baseball bat never looked better. "What the hell? Hopper's going to kill you."

"It's not Hopper's birthday," Dustin points out. "We're all gonna be waiting by your car," he adds, then sprints off before Steve can kick him in the ass.

Ungrateful shitheads. He must be half saint or something for agreeing to this. And Holly, who's still too young to be a shithead, even if she's coming up on it fast, won't quit pulling on his arm.

"Kid, we've got to hit the road."

"Pink," she sniffles, grabbing for a candy-striped hula hoop.

Steve flicks it with his finger. He's never had a sister. Max is a complete tomboy, too, so his guess is likely as good as hers...girls like hula hoops, right? Younger girls; how old this this Eleven chick turning, anyway?

Thirteen?

Look, if they weren't sneaking her birthday cakes there's a good chance they weren't sneaking her toys, either. Steve grabs the pink hoop.

Holly squeals, squeezes his fingers with her tiny ones.

Steve grabs another.

nancy

Back to the call. It comes on the first Saturday in June; Mom and Dad are due back tomorrow and instead of worrying up explanations for the god-awful mess they've let the house fall into Mike and Nancy are putting the finishing touches to the cake. Neither of them could get the bakery ladies to understand that "Eleven" was the name, not the age.

Phone rings and Mike's on it like hot glue. "You sure?" is all he asks. (They've been perfecting the plan for weeks—if anybody isn't sure by this point Nancy will be sure to give them hell for it.)

"Will says they'll be at his house in an hour," he says as he hangs up. Mike races to the kitchen counter, snatches Nancy's makeshift piping bag out of her hands. "You're so frickin' slow! I'll finish it."

“Calligraphy takes time, asshole.” She grabs for the bag.

“You call this calligraphy?” Mike snorts.

All the fluttering, pit-of-your-stomach excitement couldn’t stop her—Nancy would rip her brother’s head off if she didn’t know it would ruin Eleven’s party.

Don’t ruin it. Anything more than that and thighs will be great. Awesome. Totally tubular.

Right?

They’d better be.

Nancy breathes in, clenches her fists, and doesn’t bother with a smile. “Whatever. What do you want me to do, Mike?”

“Get Holly ready.”

“If you call everyone else up.”

“If I call Steve up.” Mike smirks.

Suddenly Nancy’s grateful that she’d got Mom’s tones-of-steel down pat. “You want to make sure Holly gets on the potty?”

“Gross!”

“Didn’t think so.” Now she’s smirking. Nancy legs it up the stairs to grab Holly’s tiny, tulle-y party dress; it’s not until she’s in her sister’s room that she lets herself wonder—

Was it a bad idea to invite him?

No. Steve is part of their group. She’s not letting what lies between them take that away.

And it’s so much easier for Nancy to believe this when they’re not close enough to touch. When she can’t hear Steve’s voice, see the way his eyes slide off hers, then back again, like he can’t help it and he hates himself for it...

The princess-pink dress snags on its hanger.

“Goddammit—this isn’t about him!” Nancy hisses to herself.

It’s not about you, either.

Remember that.

+

“Whoo!” Dustin whistles. “You’re a vision, Nance. An absolute vision!”

“Got a little brown on your nose there,” she answers, flicking it. Since Halloween talking with Mike’s friends has gotten a hundred times more bearable. They’re actually cool kids. Most of the time.

“Can you put the cake in the trunk for me?”

“Nah, Steve already did.”

He must have pulled up while she was changing. Nancy bunches a hand over her skirt and glances into the kitchen. Aside from the smears of dried buttercream on the table (not to mention three days’ worth of dishes in the sink) it’s all cleared out. The kids have swept through and carried everything party related—packages, the cake, balloons—to the van.

Maybe she forgot something upstairs, though. Better go check.

“Nance,” Dustin says. “It’s time to go.”

“I know.” Her voice catches. “I mean, I spent days planning this—”

“So it’s going to be awesome.” He flashes her a bright white smile.

Nancy’s old summer dress stretches tight across her shoulders. Sweat’s already gumming up under her arms. “Dustin? Would you—stick close to me, please? I’m feeling kind of edgy today.”

His smile spreads brighter and whiter. “No problem.” Dustin offers her his arm. “Shall we?”

+

The Byers' air conditioning broke down yesterday night. There was no way to fix it in time, so Nancy sweats under the kitchen table, knee-to-knee with Max, Will practically in her lap, waiting for Joyce to get the door already.

Footsteps on the porch. A knock.

"Huh. She said they'd be home." Hopper's voice floats through the open window.

"Dude needs to take some acting classes," Lucas groans. His breath puffs against Nancy's neck.

Max twists around to elbow him. "Shh!"

"Guys—" That's Will.

"Everybody shut up!" That's Mike.

The lock clicks. The door creaks open.

"Hi, Hop!" Joyce could use an acting class herself. "I've got it in the kitchen. Come on in for a minute."

More footsteps tramping on the threshold. The door creaks shut.

"The boys should be around here somewhere." Joyce raises her voice. "I wonder—"

Footsteps on the linoleum.

"Now!" Nancy whispers.

And the tablecloth flips up and they're scrambling out, knees smacking together, heads bonking against the edge, screaming "Surprise!" in a forest of pink and green balloons, and Jonathan's leaping out of one corner and Steve's leaping out of another and they all scream "Surprise!" again and Hop's smiling, really smiling, and Joyce is reaching for the birthday crown, and Mike, thank God, remembers to start up the chorus of "Happy Birthday".

And in the center of it all the birthday girl stands, blank-faced, pie-eyed, till Mike leans forward on the last line and plants a kiss on her cheek.

And Eleven's eyes light up like a firework show, like they all knew her eyes would.

And she laughs.

steve

Kid's beautiful. Not because of the crown streaming ribbons and fake flowers, or even how she looks, particularly. She's happy. All that happiness comes bursting out of her, fizzes through the air like cola bubbles. Bright. Sparkling.

It's like his mom says. *People are only really beautiful when they're happy*. Usually pointedly, after his dad's criticized her gray roots or her weight or some shit; Steve sees the truth of it now. Eleven's happiness is—one of those SAT-prep words—tangible. There's no mistaking it.

There he was though, that whole year, convinced Nancy loved him as much as he loved her.

Jesus. Maybe he'd be in a better mood if Max hadn't bugged him the whole way over. Thanks to Holly's car seat they'd all had to pile into Mrs. Wheeler's minivan. Steve has a newfound respect for the woman; driving that thing is like trying to steer an elephant. Max, naturally, was convinced she could do a better job.

"Let me at least go up the driveway."

"No."

"You're such a douchebag!"

"You're such an idiot!" he snapped.

"You're the idiot! You read *poetry*!"

She meant for that to get under his skin, and the stupid thing was, it did. That'd been their secret—one minute he thought these dipshits had a code of honor and the next one of them was throwing him under the bus. Steve swerved to the side of the road roller-coaster fast. Somebody in the back—either Dustin or Holly—yelped.

“One more word and you can walk the rest of the way. Got it?”

Max's lips thinned over her teeth. She turned her face away, glaring out the window.

“Dude.” Lucas poked the back of his seat. “You read poetry?”

“Sylvia Plath,” Max said quietly. “And he *cries* over it.”

Steve reached across her to open the passenger door. “Get out.”

His skin prickled from all their stares. Closest thing to stage fright he's ever felt.

“Dude.” Lucas's voice was either deeply sympathetic or deeply disgusted. “*Dude.*”

Steve wasn't betting on the latter. He kept his eyes fixed on Max. “I told you—get out and walk.”

She wouldn't move.

“Guys!” Dustin almost yelled. “Are we going to get there before Hopper and El or not?”

He was crammed in the back, right next to Nancy. Steve flicked his eyes up in the rearview mirror to take them both in. Dustin straining against his seatbelt, Nancy smiling one of those secret little smiles of hers. It would've driven Steve wild all over again if he weren't so busy being pissed.

Dustin should have been in the front seat. He almost always is whenever Steve drives them places. A little, stupid thing, but it would've helped. Max can work at Steve like sandpaper when she wants to. Dustin...that kid's a rock.

Anyway, they made it in time and nobody did end up getting dumped off on the side of the road. He'll count that as a win. Hur-fucking-rah.

+

"Oh, wow! Hold it up for the camera, sweetie."

Eleven does, then stares Jonathan's way, dead-silent.

"Tell us what it is," Mrs. Byers prompts.

Steve, who's already leaning back against the wall, stands absolutely still, on the off chance he'll blend with the wallpaper. It's no use. El turns around to look directly at him.

"What's this?" she asks.

The camera swivels his way. Steve almost ducks.

"A hula hoop," he explains.

Thank God Nancy's new boy toy isn't a complete asshole. He swivels back to El right away as she drops the toy around her waist and swirls it experimentally, mumbling "Hu-la hoop."

It's pretty much the most adorable thing he's seen since last autumn, when Dustin fell asleep beside Steve hugging a pillow like a teddy bear, but all of a sudden it's too much. Too loud. Too crunchy with wrapping paper. Too *close*. Steve slinks out of his corner and into the kitchen.

Wouldn't you know it, the first thing he hears in there is crunching. At least it's only Holly. Baby Wheeler is sitting under the table—she's taken a real liking to the spot for somebody who spent five minutes stuffed under there with five other people—gnawing on animal crackers. She burbles something at Steve's shoes, then chomps off a giraffe's head.

"That good, huh?" He grabs a cup of rainbow punch.

"Open mine next!"

“No way, open ours!”

If only his drink were spiked. Steve knocks it back as Hopper’s “One at a *time!*” rattles the walls.

If he looks back in there he’ll see Nance, floral skirt swirling around her knees, passing one or both of the presents. The dress from last summer doesn’t quite fit her anymore (the one her mom picked out; it didn’t suit her even then). She’s sweating, cakey with hairspray. She’s more beautiful than he ever remembers her being.

It’s too much.

Finally, around Steve’s third cup of punch, the last present is unwrapped and the kids surge up, stampeding out the back door. Everyone else follows. Steve guesses at least Mrs. Byers and Nancy will be back in a few minutes to light up the cake. He wipes his mouth, then crouches by the table.

“Time to go.”

Holly cocks her head.

“Don’t want to, uh...” what’s that other things his mom always says?
“...spoil your dinner. Let’s go outside.”

She considers, hopefully remembering the three bucks he shelled out for her hula hoop, which her brother told him she mostly just sucks on. Holly wipes a hand on her puffy pink skirt, then scoots his way. Blinking up at him, she holds up her arms.

Fine.

“Woah, Holly-Polly,” Steve mutters as he boosts her up. “Been eating too many of those crackers or what?”

“Holly-Polly?”

Steve turns. “You heard nothing.”

“I don’t know, man.” Dustin shakes his head. “First the poetry, now this.”

Eighty-degree air damps through the windows, smothering even Max's yells outside. Steve swipes damp hair out of his eyes. "Sylvia Plath's classic, man. Maybe you should educate yourself."

"Science," Dustin says. "That's my thing. Not...whoever Sylvia Plath is." He reaches around Steve to grab his half-full cup. "Nancy's out there."

"No shit."

"Yes shit." Dustin slurps out of Steve's cup, then burps. "You need to talk to her."

"Henderson," Steve says. "You better watch it."

His guts twist all the same.

Which is probably why the threat does exactly squat to convince Dustin. The little asshole raises an eyebrow like Steve's the bozo (and shit, is he getting tired of these *kids* thinking he's the stupid one).

"She worked hard on this party," he says. "Like, more than all the rest of us put together. So you better not be a douche and ruin it."

Holly's poking at his cheek. "I wasn't planning to," Steve snaps.

"So get out there and talk to her!" Dustin snaps back. "That's what she wants!"

"She doesn't."

"Yeah, man, she does." The cup slams down. "I don't know a whole lot about girls, okay, but your advice? That thing about ignoring them? That's shit, Steve! Bullshit!"

Steve's guts twist tighter. Anger pounds behind his eyeballs. All he's thinking, though?

Damn. They do grow up fast.

"Talk to her," Dustin says, "Or I'm telling everyone about Holly-Polly. Swear to God."

nancy

"No, no, honey," says Joyce. "You put your whole heart into this; I can handle the candles. You rest."

Nancy about to point out that Joyce hasn't exactly been slouching around—streamers wreath tree branches and the eaves of the backyard shed. Even the back of the lawn chair Joyce pushes her into ("Sit").

"Keep Hop company," Jonathan's mom orders. "He's getting antsy. I can tell."

"Only one who's antsy's you," he grumbles. "Just light the damn candles already."

Something twinkles in Joyce's eyes. Nancy could swear its mischief. "Will do," she says, and snags Hopper's cigarette from between his lips. Then bounces—*bounces*—up the back steps while he watches.

"Are you checking her out?" Nancy asks.

Hopper drops his eyes. Lights another cigarette. "Christ, kid. So what if I am?"

"Nothing." Nancy settles back. "We're all just waiting for you guys to make it official."

"Ha," he says flatly, "ha."

As Joyce steps inside the door Dustin brushes past her, rainbow punch staining his mouth. He catches Nancy's eye, winks, then waves, before racing back to join the other kids around the basketball hoop.

What the hell?

Seconds later Steve comes out, Holly toddling along beside him. Nancy starts to get up, but he stops at the bottom of the stairs, watching closely as her sister works her own way down.

Impressive.

She'd gratefully leave it at that—she would, really—except now he's coming toward them. Nancy can't read his face. She used to be able to, all the time. It used to be so easy.

What does Steve want?

Hopper's right next to her; it's not like Nancy can make a break for it. She's not sure she wants to.

What does *she* want?

"Is this seat taken?"

He's pointing to the lawn chair streaming pink crepe. Nancy shakes her head.

Steve sits down. Awkwardly.

Nancy swallows. Pleats her skirt between her fingers.

Awkwardly.

"I didn't know you liked Sylvia Plath," she blurts.

Hopper heaves himself up.

"I don't need to know," he growls, brushing the cigarette ash off his pants. He scoops Holly up to straddle his shoulders. "Let's go, Blondie. Check on that cake."

That leaves them. Alone. Together. Nancy worries her bottom lip with her teeth. Jonathan could look over any minute—Will convinced him to ditch the camcorder to shoot baskets. If he does he won't mind what he sees.

Sometimes (all the time) Nancy thinks Jonathan understands her and Steve better than either her or Steve do.

"You should've told me," she says now.

"I didn't get into her until last winter," he says.

“Oh.”

She pictures him, alone in his room, in his empty house, flopped out on his bed. Putting the book down every few pages to bounce a ball or twiddle a pencil. Short attention span. That’s something their teachers never got about Steve. He’s not stupid, or even lazy. His mind just jumps. All over.

“‘The Stones’.”

“What?”

“That one was my favorite,” he says. “‘The Stones’.”

Nancy turns to look at him. “I have a confession to make.”

Steve’s lips quirk. “All yours.”

“I’ve never read Sylvia Plath.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Nope. I don’t know ‘The Stones’ from The Rolling Stones.”

“Shit.” Steve runs a hand through his hair. It’s wilting in the heat. “So I know something Nancy Wheeler doesn’t. How about that.”

Down by the hoop, Max and Will gang up in order to block Lucas’s shot.

“Quote me a line,” Nancy says.

He shakes his head. “No, nah. It’s stupid.”

“One line.”

“I’m not some kind of beatnik.”

“Steve. Are you going to make me beg?”

He grins at her, lazy, like old times. “Should I?”

“Steve.”

steve

"Ten fingers shape a bowl of shadows.

My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.

I shall be good as new."

+

He's not.

A beatnik.

A poet.

Someone who *knows* these kinds of things.

The words—her words—let him sound like he does.

+

Steve watches her face change. For a minute there they were what they used to be. Talking easily. Laughing. Hell, maybe even loving each other, but he's always loved her, still does and always will....

They don't fit together anymore. If they ever did.

"That was beautiful," Nancy tells him, all pointed chin thrust forward and blinking, earnest blue eyes.

Good as new, the both of them.

+

"We're still friends."

+

"We can still be friends."

+

The way she says it, pissed off, furious.

You're an idiot, Steve Harrington.

nancy

“Don’t forget to make a wish! One...two...”

Holly tugs at her hair. Jonathan’s arm squeezes around her shoulder.

“Three!”

Nancy has to look away when Joyce cuts into the cake. Pretty stupid, since Mike was right. Her calligraphy isn’t that great. His, slopped down near the bottom, is worse: *Happy Birthday, Eleven Jane! From Mike, Nancy, Dustin, Will, Lucas, Max, Jonathan, Mrs. Byers + Hopper* (that’s where he started), & *Steve*.

“Thanks,” Hopper tells her, on the sly, while everyone’s gumming their way through layers of fondant and buttercream. “It was...kid, it was the best party any of us could hope to give her.”

Nancy shrugs. “No big deal.” Because she knows it physically pains the guy to be this earnest.

Eleven hugs her, too. Jonathan kisses her. Dustin slides in for a first bump; Mike even admits that she did an “okay” job. Coming from him that’s practically a gold star.

But Nancy can’t stop thinking.

If she’d made a wish on those candles, she would have squeezed her eyes shut and prayed for things to be exactly how they are and exactly how they were. Steve’s part of their whole group now. Their family. She wouldn’t change that for the world.

He’s not her Steve Harrington anymore. It hurts more than it should. But they were close, for those few minutes. Like they used to be. He

didn't mope, she didn't cry, the party wasn't ruined. Can't that be enough?

Nancy licks through a buttercream rose, pretending she doesn't know the answer.

steve

"Lift me."

He just lifted Max so she could dunk the ball. That girl may be light on her feet, but she's not light; Steve's still panting. He wipes his face, combs back his hair, and stares down at Eleven.

"Can't you levitate yourself?"

"I want you to lift me."

He huffs out a breath. *Remember, this is the kid who can snap necks with her mind.* "If I throw out my back you're gonna be the one fixing it. Got that?"

El nods. "Got it."

"Fine, okay. Grab the ball. Let's go."

He boosts her up; the kid's somehow both bird-boned and heavy. El makes a small happy sound when she slams the basketball through the hoop. Not a squeal. Almost close.

Steve's lowering her as Dustin hurtles up, panting like a steam engine. He's got Jonathan's camera slung around his neck.

"Freeze! Smile!"

Like it's something they planned out beforehand (and knowing these idiots, it probably is) everyone else on the court crowds around him, flashing their biggest say-cheese grins. El loops her arms around Steve's neck and presses her cheek to his. Will and Jonathan block him from the front so he can't get away.

“Excellent, excellent,” Dustin mumbles. Then, “Steve, I’m just warning you, man—if you don’t smile for this you’ll look like a real idiot.”

“I will bury you,” Steve mutters through his grin.

“Bite me.” The shutter clicks. “Don’t move, don’t move! One more.”

Steve is pretty sure they all knew Nancy would come down the porch, Holly locked to her hip. Dustin did, at least. He’s pretty damn sure it isn’t a spur-of-the-moment thing when the dipshit turns his head and yells, all-too-casually, “Nance! Take our picture, would you? I want to get in this one!”

She offers them that small smile again. “Sure.”

“Thanks,” Dustin unloops the camera’s strap, hands it over. “Come on, Holly. You want to be in the picture, too?”

“I’ll hold her,” says Max, and “What?” when Lucas snickers.

Dustin jostles into the knot surrounding Steve. He throws an arm around his shoulder. “Good job, my man.”

Steve snorts, shifting as Eleven keeps one arm around his shoulders and throws the other around Mike’s.

“No, no, you two had an actual conversation. For the first time in like, a year. That’s excellent, man.” Dustin whispers his next words through the side of his mouth as the camera flashes. “That’s all you both wanted.”

Little shit.

“I see things. I’m not stupid.”

No. Dustin’s the rock, the smartest of them all. Steve’s known that since last autumn. Means he’d sometimes like to deck the kid one, and it doesn’t mean Dustin is anywhere near as smart as he thinks he is, but today, of all days...if it makes him happy, so what?

Steve untangles his arm enough to ruffle the kid’s hair.

“Oh, that’s a good one!” says Nancy. “Hold it...”

“Oh, and by the way.” Dustin's still talking out the side of his mouth like a pint-sized ventriloquist. “Hopper wants to know whose idea it was to get El a turtle.”

+

Chief should be grateful. They were this close to buying her a ferret.

A fucking *ferret*.

When he gets home Steve thinks he'll hop in the pool before cracking open Plath again. Her poems'll be a damn stroll in the park compared to Jim Hopper.

nancy

Here's what he said the first time she asked: “Nance. She's not gonna want me there.”

A lie, and they both knew it, but telling him so wouldn't convince him.

+

Here's what she said.

+

"I do."

Author's Note:

Three things:

1.) I never found a convenient place to mention it in the story, but the reason Nancy and Hopper communicate by walkie-talkie is because they both figured it would be far less awkward than having him call up the Wheeler's house and asking for her. It

hasn't quite been a year since season 2 yet, so they still have to be pretty secretive when it comes to El.

2.) The title and the poetry quotes are all, obviously, from Sylvia Plath.

3.) Though this isn't directly connected to "Every Night You Stay", I couldn't resist dropping a reference to it in there. :)

Find me at [tumblr](#) and [dreamwidth](#)!